

Raising Frankenstein

ONE.

Curating — as we all know — is not a liberal profession; the curator's qualifications are not defined by a relatively homogeneous higher education training similar to that of sciences or humanities, above all because the right to practice as a curator is not governed by a self-imposed restriction on competition that gives an academic, trade or professional body the right to validate the titles or conditions under which one is qualified to work. Unlike the drive towards professionalization that was involved in the development of different museum professions under the French state-based paradigm of museology and museography some thirty years ago, which through various associations such as ICOM or CIMAM always attempted to generalize a formal deontological code and an ethical regulation of museum practices, the notion of curating has proven resistant to any notion of academic or professional regulation. Paraphrasing Max Weber's well known typology of forms of authority—and despite the fears of many of our colleagues who learnt their trade by means of the *traditional* succession involved in old-fashioned apprenticeships, or those who became curators through some kind of charismatic self-proclamation—the truth is that a modern “rational-legal” reproduction of professional curators remains a fraction of the current system of the reproduction of the profession. In fact, it is arguable that there is practically no curator whose vocational call does not involve to a certain extent a peculiar mix of genealogical, bureaucratic and messianic modes of inception.

TWO.

As Nathalie Heinich and Michael Pollak argued in the late 1980s (although they were mistaken in thinking it was just a transitory condition), the development of the contemporary notion of the curator involves a certain process of “de-professionalization.”¹ Functions that seemed, from the viewpoint of the modernist paradigm of the development of professions, a result of the trend towards specialization accompanying an increasing sophistication of knowledge with a growing division of labour, appear to collapse in an ever more idiosyncratic manner in the condition of the curator. Tasks formerly reserved for art critics, fundraisers, connoisseurs, artists, dealers, cultural politicians, museum designers, archivists, impresarios, historians, activists, theorists, fans, secretaries and sparring partners, are fused into a veritable postmodern *mélange*. Each curator is, by a rule, some kind of Frankenstein composite of those formerly stable identities. However, the mix and confusion of those disciplinary constructs is never homogeneous: even institutional curators are valued precisely for what their peers are not.

However, Heinich and Pollak were wrong in understanding such a “crisis of the profession” as a result of the increase and specialization of temporary exhibition practices and/or a claim of exhibition authorship provoked by the invasion of philosophers, anthropologists and artists to the role of exhibition producers and the borrowing of the cinema theory of the *auteur*, or to be precise, the “*curateur*.” Rather, we have to take into account the debt that

the redefinition and de-definition of curatorial practices owe to at least two other decisive art historical moments: the self-consciousness of the art institution and the contextual nature of artistic practice, derived in great part from the coalition of artists, thinkers and cultural activists around conceptual art in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the metropolis; and the geopolitical awareness, identity politics and art historical turmoil provoked by the coming into visibility of the artistic practices of the so-called periphery and the complex interlocking of regions, genealogies and concepts provoked by the postcolonial and global art revolutions of the 1990s. The concept of the contemporary curator inheres both to the self-critical sensitivity that turned exhibitions, institutions and projects into self-interrogations of the protocols of institutional power provoked by conceptualism, and to the deterritorialization, translation, brokering and contaminations involved in the decentering of the art world.² Much more than “creation,” two words plague the vocabulary of our trade: negotiation and intervention. In fact, one could claim that if curating departs from the ideal of critical purity of the twentieth-century intellectual, this is because its mode of operation and thinking has to do with the particular, and that, along with critique, it always instigates a certain negotiation with powers, epistemologies and public discourses. A curator is meant to negotiate everything but his or her way of negotiating. That is the reason why the term “curator,” beyond its genealogy as a title inherited from ancient Roman law (the *curatus*, the keeper, carer or superintendent of an alien property, for instance, of

an orphan), is the locus of a permanent revision and reinvention of artistic contexts.³

THREE.

Given that curating, as stated above, is a contextual, strategic, self-critical and above all ad hoc activity, how is it that we have so generally assumed that curatorial training can be a matter of higher education? How can one pretend to teach, i.e. to impart the knowledge and instruct in the skills of an inherently indeterminate and, to a great extent, deregulated practice? How can one pretend to reproduce individuals able to assume such hybrid, cannibalistic and singular functions? I hope we share a common understanding that, given its problematic stance as a profession, curating not only refuses a general definition, but also seems impossible to teach as such. People become/assume/presume the function of the curator, and no degree of higher education can guarantee that they are capable, let alone of proper curating, but of curating at all. This realization, which also involves the recognition of the open field (i.e. the extra-university field) of curatorial calling, leaves however ample room to accompany, nurture and tutor the process of curatorial agency. In a word: you may not be able to *teach curating* but it is perfectly viable (and increasingly productive) to *educate curators*, i.e. to persuade them of a number of possible modes of operation, to assist their intellectual, ethical and aesthetic development, to contribute to the refinement of judgment by advising and criticizing their practice. In other words, curating is not a discipline that can

be streamlined by a set of established courses and tasks, but the individuals involved in becoming professional curators benefit from the experience of a speculative and intersubjective space of disciplinary study. All this, of course, applies especially if these individuals lack any previous curatorial experience or are actually returning to the university system in pursuit of a chance to revolutionize their own trajectory. By the same token, it is entirely possible that curators can also gain a specific benefit from seeking their own education outside curatorial studies programs, by getting involved in any other pertinent disciplinary training, according to their own specific agendas.

In fact, despite the logical, centrifugal tendency of curatorial courses towards innovation and differentiation from each other—especially in the last five years when the relative monopoly of the founding fathers of curatorial studies programs (Bard College and the Royal College of Art) was seriously undermined by many other institutions—educating curators involves a number of elements in common. Despite the enormous diversity in the design of the academic prospectus, most curatorial studies programs worthy of that name, both in the North and the South, in university postgraduate programs and informal, almost amateurish ventures, tend to provide their participants with a core of pedagogical devices:

- a) A number of critical theory, history of art and history of exhibition courses or seminars aimed to provide their students with a shared number of historical, theo-

retical and curatorial points of reference. It goes without saying that these contents are never neutral: they instill a number of hegemonic views, which later coalesce in the interlocking of ideological principles of practice.

b) A supervised experience, either individual or collective, of exhibition-making or project management, which provides a semblance of professional practice and a chance for visibility. Surely, those experiences are modelled, most of the time, after certain paradigmatic forms of professional operation. In fact, the most significant cleavage between the final exhibitions of such characteristic institutions as the CCS at Bard College, in the USA, and the Curating and Commissioning Contemporary Art Course of the Royal College of Art, in the UK, was that the RCA's final show made students share the experience of the division of labour among staff in a museum project, whereas the individual shows at Bard College suggested the self-reliance of the independent (or privately financed) curator.

c) A constant exposure to lectures, dialogues and visits of both established and emergent peers, who are usually requested to speak from the particularity of their experience of practice. Such interaction implicitly acknowledges that, given the impossibility of developing a theory of curating, the shaping of a curator depends to a great extent of the emulation, criticism, borrowing, assessment and contagion of other profes-

sionals' trajectories, and the experience of the reasoning or rationalization of their practice and even a taste of the professional attitudes they developed through time. Similarly, to be invited to lecture in such institutions, especially in the metropolitan centres, serves the curatorial community as a mode of recognition of individual status as exemplary of a certain type of context or practice.

d) A share of the symbolic capital of the institution and its faculty, in terms of providing the curators with a number of chances to insert themselves into several artistic, curatorial, institutional and critical networks. This ranges from giving the participants an implicit validation to do studio visits and a certain backroom exploration of the working methods of institutions, to the benefits of access to simple power tools such as email and phone directories, VIP cards and invitations to events, and the knowledge of a number of research resources.

e) Last but not least, a significant advantage in the competition within certain job markets, either because specific museums or galleries tend to recruit systematically from specific schools via access to internship programs, or because of the way the curatorial program's staff serves informally as a recruiting agency for their peers amongst working curators. Certainly curatorial programs and curator guilds and organizations do not have any regularized means to curb the informal market

of curatorial jobs, but many of the current institutions have a certain monopoly in providing staff to certain networks of institutional administration, which in turn develops into future structures of collaboration and complicity in the art world.

FOUR.

To what extent the education of the curator has critically transformed the workings of contemporary art and its institutions, or is mostly a side effect of the way contemporary capitalism relies on higher education to naturalize class and social divides and make them appear the result of education and merit, is anybody's guess.

As a practice and mode of thinking entrenched in the particular (the specifics of a cultural and political agenda, the local interactions of different structures of power, the healthy bias towards a certain number and kind of contemporary artists), curating is not so much a *profession* as a *function* that adjusts and mutates according to each specific project, show or institution. Even the relative stability, routine and professional dignity of the museum or institutional curator are untenable today without the potential horrors of multitasking, networking, self-financing and self-promoting. Small surprise that the activities of the curator tend to provoke frequent misgivings amongst audiences, journalists, artists, art critics and, above all, most academics. No amount of academic validation, or even the most demanding higher education curriculum, is able to dispel the impression that curators lack any shared professional criteria.

Despite the extraordinary pandemics of curatorial, museum and gallery studies all through the world in the last years, curating remains to a great extent a paradise of the improvised. As used to be the case with poets, to claim that one is a curator does not even require one to have made an exhibition or project: the curator is a child of the sleight of hand of performative speech. It is still the case that to become a curator it suffices to define oneself as such. But what gives curating its bad name is also its potential. I hope that I am not alone in thinking that if all of us, independently of our education, are de facto curators, unable to expect professional validation from our peers, it is not because our professional de-definition is an aberration. That all kinds of curators, the educated and the arrivistes, compete, collaborate and merge in the same space, remains one of the main obstacles to the neutralization of a joyously volatile form of artistic culture. That the unschooled Frankenstein might be as artistically and critically significant as the one equipped with a PhD is all the more pertinent at a time when the most significant artistic practices involve a critique, discomfort or disobedience towards the instrumental protocols and the epistemological conventions of this society and time.

1.

Nathalie Heinich and Michael Pollak, "From Museum Curator to Exhibitor Auteur: Inventing a Singular Position," in *Thinking about Exhibitions*, ed. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne (London: Routledge, 1996), 231–265.

2.

See Mari Carmen Ramirez, "Brokering identities," in *Thinking about Exhibitions*, 21–38.

3.

Diccionario de la Real Academia, vol. 2, 401.